DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 265 543 CS 209 505

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TITLE Reading Literature: Integrating Close Reading, Responding, and Writing--A Model for Teaching.
PUB DATE [81]
NOTE 19p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Elementary Secondary Education; *Literary Criticism; *Literature Appreciation; *Metaphors; Reader Response; Reading Material Selection; Student Evaluation; *Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

Noting National Assessment of Educational Progress findings that indicate students have difficulty analyzing literature, this paper presents a model for teaching students the process of reading and responding to literature in an orderly manner. Following an introduction to the problem of literature analysis in the schools, the model is discussed in terms of (1) developing a rationale for using a particular work in the classroom, (2) general instructional objectives for the literature course, and (3) characteristics of teaching strategies suitable for the literature classroom. Guidelines for discussing a story in class are described, including categories of questions to which students can respond. The next elements discussed are ways to help students understand metaphor, and two passages by Ray Bradbury are given--one verbatim, the other devoid of the author's figurative language. Questions for exploring metaphors are included. Finally, the model's activities for evaluating student performance, for both teacher and students, are presented. (HTH)

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Reading Literature: Integrating Close Reading, Responding, and Writing -- A Model for Teaching

Robert W. Blake

Teaching students how to read literature carefully and confidently is a difficult task, possibly the most complex one facing the English teacher. All of us who teach English have struggled with this problem and sensed intuitively that in spite of our determined efforts that most students move slowly and tentatively toward a secure sense of their ability to read literature.

It should be no surprise to us, therefore, that a recent study of young people's reading habits and ability to respond to literature by the National Assessment of Educational Progress found that for 9-, 13- and 17- year-olds throughout the nation, analyzing literature was difficult for many, and for 17-year- olds especially, "thinking about what they have read and expressing their thoughts coherently appear to be difficult and unfamiliar tasks." For the study, students from these three age groups were asked to answer multiple choice questions and then write short essays interpreting short prose passages or poems and giving reasons for their responses. Generally, the students did better on answering multiple-choice questions than they did on essays and on discussing their personal reactions to a passage than they did at "analyzing a passage's characteristics--for example, its mood, theme, or characters." The report suggests that how English teachers teach literature and test are responsible for the state of affairs, that lectures on literature interpretation and evaluating by multiple-choice test items may not prepare students in a systematic fashion to read texts closely and use evidence from texts for their judgments.

CS209 505

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In this paper I'd like to present a model for teaching students the process of reading and responding to literature in an orderly manner, to help them learn what Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren call the "critical apparatus," as well for giving them practice in responding personally to what they have read. At the same time they're learning rudimentary critical skills and becoming confident in their personal responses, they can learn how to integrate--with careful reading and responding--skills of writing, discussing for a purpose, identifying and writing metaphor and extended metaphor, and, with the teacher and other students, evaluating their performance of these skills.

A Model for Teaching Literature

Essential elements of the model are a rationale, a statement of general instructional objectives, teaching strategies, and a means for evaluating student performance.

Rationale: Deciding What To Teach. With the rationale, I justify my use of a particular poem, short story, play, or novel, answering for the students and for myself such questions as these: Is the piece rich and worthwhile, being at the same time not too difficult for these particular students, but complex and mature enough to stretch their critical abilities? Will the students be able to practice several skills of reading, responding, discussing, and writing through a study of it? Will the sample speak directly to a wide range of students? Is the example representative of those pieces of literature which members of our society judge as being worthy for young people to read and ponder?

In order to demonstrate how the model works, I've chosen the short story, "There Will Come Soft Rains," by Ray Bradbury. Although any number of short stories would serve my purpose, I can justify my choice for several reasons. First, the story does not have complex syntax nor an extensive vocabulary, but it can provoke discussion about themes basic to our society and raises questions critical for young people to examine. The story, furthermore, offers extensive opportunities for integrating oral and written language skills. But most importantly for our purposes, the story is richly dramatic, bursting with striking images and unusual figurative language and dealing with themes both provocative and profound.

General Instructional Objectives: Deciding What The Students Should Do. Once I have chosen a worthwhile piece, I need to state in specific terms what skills I expect the students to perform as they read and respond to the story. Such objectives are essential because they inform my instruction and present concrete guidelines for the students. Instructional objectives are stated in terms of what students will actually do; they are specific statements of behaviors that both the teacher and students can observe and agree upon.

For this story, then, these are my proposed instructional objectives. From their reading, responding, discussing, and writing about the story, the students should be able to do these things:

--read the story through first for a personal, emotional response,

--read the story through a second time more carefully and thoughtfully and discuss with me and with other students questions dealing with these categories: personal reactions, plain-sense meaning, structure, interpretation, and value,

--identify examples of literal and figurative language and explain which are more effective and why,

--explain in what ways the two items being compared in metaphors taken from the story are alike yet different,

--write interesting metaphors, comparing common objects with an essentially different item, and

--using one of the simple metaphors previously created, write an extended metaphor, showing several ways in which the two items are similar.

Teaching Strategies: Deciding How To Teach. Now that I have chosen the particular piece of literature for students to read and respond to and having decided what skills they might practice through the process, I need to devise strategies for encouraging them to practice these skills.

Generally, the teaching strategies should have these characteristics. They should

--provide for individual responses within the framework of a commonly studied piece,

--provide specific guidelines for the students to read the text closely and carefully, using approaches adapted from those developed by scholars, researchers and teachers of literature,

--offer frequent and varied opportunities for the students to sharpen their language skills,

--involve many kinds of learning, such as demonstrating knowledge, comprehending, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating,

--assist students in learning how to evaluate their own performance, with the aim of their becoming more self critical and relying less on my judgment,

--provide for interaction, feedback, and discussion, essential elements for a realistic appraisal of one's work, and

--be directly related to the general instructional objectives.

Introducing the Story: (Objective: The students will relate some themes of science fiction to the story.) With this specific objective in mind, I might give an introduction like this:

What Is Science Fiction About?

Many students your age like to read science fiction stories. You may have read about time travel, in which men journey into the distant future or into the past. You may have seen television shows in which men in rocket ships explore distant stars. You may have read about the marvelous things scientists can do like replacing an eye, arm, or the legs of men and women with wonderful synthetic parts that make them superhuman!

Science fiction is about all these subjects and many more. Basically the science fiction writer takes some modern invention like the rocket ship or the atomic bomb and writes about what might happen to it in the future. Take the television set, for instance. Almost every house in our country has at least one set. Stores and banks use closed circuit television to prevent robberies. What would happen in the future if the government placed television sets in our houses so officials could hear everything we said and watch everything we did?

Many times, the title of a story can give you a good idea of what it's going to be about. Actually, though, the title of this story won't mean much to you until after you've read it, discussed it, and thought about its meaning.

Now read the story first fairly quickly for its general meaning. Then be prepared to read it over more carefully so you can respond to the questions which follow.

Discussing The Story. The teaching questions are designed to help students learn how to respond personally and to read closely pieces of fiction. The categories of questions are not meant to be used slavishly but rather to serve as starting points for discussion and are based upon what scholars, researchers, and experienced teachers of literature have developed. The idea of "plain-sense" meaning we owe to I. A. Richards. The notion of personal response is advanced by the proponents of "subjective criticism," such as David Bleich and Norman Holland. Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, founders of the "New Criticism," maintain in their The Scope of Fiction that there are only three basic questions to attend to during the reading of fiction: 1. What happens? 2. Who are the people? and 3. What does it mean? Alan Purves shows us the wide variety of questions available for teaching response to literature. And Louise M. Rosenblatt, who has added the term "transactional analysis" to the lexicon of literary study, provides us with the distinction between "efferent" reading, "in which the primary concern of the reader is what he will carry away from the reading" and "aesthetic" reading, that reading in which "the reader's attention is centered directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text." (italics the author's.) I make such references to show my decisions about what kinds of questions to raise concerning a piece of literature are not haphazard nor irrational but are based upon extensive reading, experience, and research.

Even though the sample questions which follow may appear simplistic, they are designed to give students practice in putting into words--orally or in writing--vaguely held feelings or ideas about a piece of literature.

As an introduction at the beginning of the school year, I would go over with the students the kinds of questions posed here. I might very well read them out loud (or have students do so) and question the students further, assisting them and encouraging them in several ways in their responses so they will, over a period of time, come to internalize the process of close reading. Initially, I approach the story through guided discussion with the full class. Later, when the students become more adept at responding, they may well read the questions by themselves, write out personal responses, and read their responses to each other in pairs or in small groups.

Categories of Questions

1. Personal Response: How Do You Feel About It? (Objective: The students learn to have confidence in expressing their personal feelings about a piece of literature.)

How did you feel when you finished reading the story? Sad or angry? Describe your feelings.

2. Plain-sense Meaning: What Happens in the Story? (Objective: The students learn to relate the plain-sense meaning--what happens on the surface level--of a story.)

a. Where does the story take place? In what city and state? What is the exact date?

b. What has happened to the city in which the house stands?

c. Who has lived in the home? What has become of them?

d. When did the house begin to die?

3. Structure: How's It Put Together? (Objective: The students learn how to discern and explain the structure of a piece.)

a. How long does the story take?

b. What happens at the beginning? List the things that the house does for its occupants in the morning.

c. What does the house do in the afternoon? How did the house prepare for the mother's afternoon? What was the "children's hour"? Describe it.

d. What started the house on fire? List the ways the house tried to save itself.

e. How does the ending relate to the beginning?

4. Meaning: What's the Story Mean? (Objective: The students learn how to interpret confidently--based upon evidence from the text--the meaning of the story, including the effect of the setting, why characters behave as they do, and what a story "means," what its themes may be.)

a. This is an unusual story because there are no living people in it. But there is a house, and it acts like a human being. Find phrases that make the house seem alive. Here is one example: "Until this day, how well the house had kept its peace . . . ." "It quivered at each sound, the house did."

b. There are parts of the house that act alive also. "In the living room, the voice-clock sang, Tick-tock, seven o'clock, time to get up, seven o'clock!" Find other objects that are described as living things. Here are some examples: the breakfast stove, the kitchen ceiling, the garage door, and the tiny robot mice.

c. The story takes place in the year 2026 and deals with a house in which virtually everything is done for human beings by machines. List present-day machines that could become our servants in the future. We have clock

radios, for instance, that awaken people to music and garage doors that open automatically when a car appears. What do you believe the author is saying in this story about such gadgets?

d. Although the house is a marvel of mechanical devices designed to care for man, the four humans who lived in the house have been killed by an atomic blast. Scientists have invented wonderful things to make our lives easier, but they have also developed atomic and hydrogen bombs--which could destroy us. Are all machines for our good? Can't they make us dull and soft? What precautions can we take to lessen the harm that machines may bring to us?

Now that you have read and discussed the story, why do you suppose Ray Bradbury names it "There Will Come Soft Rains"? Read over the selection from the poem by Sara Teasdale, which the study ceiling recites. Why are these lines ironic?

> And not one will know of the war, not one
> Will care at last when it's done.

What do you think the word "ironic" means? If you can't guess its meaning from its use here, look it up in your dictionary.

e. What is civilization? How do we define it? What does your dictionary say? How is it measured? By the number of cars, toasters, television sets, and automatic dishwashers that each family own? Or by the songs that its people sing, the books that they write and read, and by the good they do for each other? How do you feel about our civilization? Do we have a good one?

f. Can we feel emotions for machines? How does the writer persuade us to feel sorry for the gadgets of the house? Notice phrases such as "the house had kept its peace," "the house tried to save itself," "the house shuddered."

5. Value: How Good Is It? (Objective: The students learn to evaluate the story in terms of external criteria--judging the story against other stories read--and in terms of internal criteria--how the story is measured against their personal criteria for a good story.)

a. Compared to other stories you have read, how would you rate this story on a scale of one to ten, with ten being the best? Explain your judgment.

b. What's your idea of a good story? Does this story fit your personal estimate of a good story? Explain why or why not.

Now that the students have responded personally to the story and discussed aspects of it with the teacher and with other students, they can consider how Ray Bradbury used figurative language--metaphor and extended metaphor, especially--so effectively in this story.

Understanding Metaphor. (Objective: The students learn to identify examples of literal and figurative language and explain why one example is more effective than the other.) In order to help the students understand the difference between literal and figurative language, we might duplicate these two selections, one paragraph copied verbatim from the story, the other derived from the same passage but devoid of Bradbury's figurative language.

First Version

The house shuddered, oak bone on bone, its bared skeleton cringing from the heat, its wire, its nerves revealed as if a surgeon had torn the skin off to let the red veins and capillaries quiver in the scalded air. Help, help! Fire! Run, run! Heat snapped mirrors like the first brittle winter ice. And the voices wailed. Fire, fire, run, run, like a tragic nursery rhyme, a

dozen voices, high, low, like children dying in a forest alone, alone. And the voices fading as the wires popped their sheathings like hot chestnuts. One, two, three, four, five voices died.

Second Version

The house burned with its bare planks and wires showing in the hot air. Tape recorded voices from the house said, "Help, help! Fire! Run, run!" The heat of the fire broke mirrors on the walls. The tape recorded voices faded as the wires of the machines were destroyed by the fire. Five voices stopped.

In what specific ways are the two versions different?

Now, the students might consider which of the following two sentences are more vivid and why.

a. The house shuddered, oak bone on bone, its bared skeleton cringing from the heat, its wire, its nerves revealed as if a surgeon had torn the skin off to let the red veins and capillaries quiver in the scalded air.

b. The house burned with its bare planks and wires showing in the hot air.

In the first version, Ray Bradbury implies that the house is a person. A house, of course, cannot be a person, a living, breathing human being. But if we compare a house to a person, or say that it's like a person, then we may have feelings for the house. Although a house and a person are very different, we must find ways in which they are alike if we wish to compare them.

Next I move on to have students analyze in more detail the characteristics of metaphor. (Objective: The students learn to explain in what ways two items being compared in metaphors from the story are both alike and different.)

The students should identify the two things that are compared in the following figures of speech. They might consider these questions: What qualities do the two items have in common? How are they alike? How are they different?

a. Heat snapped mirrors like the first brittle winter ice.

b. And the voices wailed Fire, fire, run, run, like a tragic nursery rhyme.

c. And the voices wailed, high, low, like children dying in a forest, alone, alone.

d. The wires popped their sheathings like hot chestnuts.

e. Now the fire lay in beds, stood in windows, changed the color of drapes.

From analysis, the students move to synthesis--the creation of simple metaphors. I write the following incomplete sentences on the chalkboard and have the students complete them. (Objective: The students write simple yet interesting metaphors, comparing a common object with an essentially different item.)

Example: The lawnmower is a grass-eating beast.

a. The small sports car is a _____.

b. The electric can opener is a _____.

c. The automatic dishwasher is a _____.

d. The jet airplaine is a _____.

e. The escalator is a _____.

The next logical step is to have the students move from a simple to an extended metaphor. In the paragraph that they have just studied, for instance, students see that Ray Bradbury didn't write that the house was a person. Rather, he wrote "The house shuddered" (literally, only a living creature "shudders"), and then goes on to tell in what ways the house acted like a person. This kind of writing is called extended metaphor. Here are further examples of the house being described as a living creature.

The house shuddered.

The house had oak bones.

The house had wire-like nerves and exposed veins and capillaries.

Now the students can take one of the metaphors they created in the preceding activity and extend the ways in which the first object has the qualities of the second. (Objective: The students learn to write an extended metaphor by using some of the simple metaphors previously written and by showing several ways in which the two items are similar.)

Example: The lawnmower gobbled up the grass, spitting out the leftover scraps, glaring at me, shuddering now and then as if in an angry fit, all the while snarling harsh words.

Evaluating the Student's Performance. Evaluation is an integral part of teaching and learning because it helps teachers learn how effective their instruction is, and it allows students to see how well they are progressing and growing. It should go without saying that evaluation is never intended to trick or demean students.

In the scheme I propose for this teaching model, the evaluation activities are directly related to the instructional objectives and to the reading, re-

sponding, and discussing activities that exemplify the instructional objectives. The evaluation items reflect a wide variety of intellectual skills in the cognitive and affective domains, including knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, evaluation, responding, and valuing.

There are two parts to the evaluation. In an Evaluating Yourself section, I would have students rate themselves on a scale of from 1 to 5 in areas like these: abilities to read and respond to a story, to identify examples of literal and figurative language and explain the differences between the two, and to create simple and extended metaphors.

Having students evaluate themselves is valuable for three reasons. First, the students learn to develop an internal locus of evaluation, that is, they gain confidence in their ability to value their personal judgment about how well they have performed a given task. They learn to become autonomous, to rely less upon the external evaluation of authority figures like parents and teachers. Essentially, I would have students perform activities and create samples of oral and written language and learn to judge for themselves how well they have mastered the skills of reading and responding to literature.

The Evaluating Yourself section is also valuable for the students because it may be used as a basis for discussing their performance with the teacher and with each other. As a result of the discussion, they can learn how others perceive their performances. Students who tend to be unassuming and self-critical may gain confidence from the praise their classmates give them. Other students, however, who believe they are performing at a higher level than they actually are may come to a more realistic appraisal of their performance after comments by their peers.

And finally such evaluation activities allow the students and teachers to consider complex intellectual skills which take a long time to internalize. Being able to write an interesting metaphor is an important high-level intellectual skill which unfortunately cannot be evaluated by a multiple choice or matching test. The Evaluating Yourself activities provide an opportunity for students and teachers alike to discover how well they can perform sophisticated language skills like "writing an extended metaphor."

In the second aspect of the evaluation scheme, I would test the students on their ability to perform the same kinds of activities they have been practicing throughout this unit. As with the activities in the Evaluating Yourself section, they would do these things: justify why one of two passages is more effective than another, create simple metaphors by completing structures like this, "A motorcycle is _____," and, by building upon a single metaphor, create an extended metaphor.

Such a model for teaching literature will never work, of course, unless I am well-trained, patient, and sympathetic. I can't emphasize too strongly how crucial my behavior is in this whole undertaking. How I create a classroom atmosphere for successful literature teaching is beyond the scope of this paper, but at this point I should like to present at least two things I need to keep in mind.

First, I need to devise and follow in a systematic fashion a plan for allowing students to learn the critical apparatus for reading literature. I don't, though, I must keep on reminding myself, need to follow any plan slavishly. It has been my experience that at least initially I may follow the model fairly closely, but as the students learn to use more and more naturally

the tools of analysis, I can decide on the spot when to encourage unplanned responses, when to delete material, and when to let discussion go where it might. The more the students can demonstrate basic approaches to reading and responding, the less I need to direct their activities. This does not mean I scrap my general plan for teaching literature. Rather, it implies that my students have learned the skills of interpreting literature so well they have become second nature and that they can now devote their energies to relating what they have read to high level literary concerns such as character development, the effect of setting on personality, or the relation of elements of the story to broad themes.

Even more importantly than following a preconceived model for teaching literature, I need to create a classroom atmosphere in which students are uninhibited about expressing responses to literature. I must simply stop talking so much of the time and provide students opportunities to practice interpreting and justifying their own readings. The temptation for all of us--because we really are very good at this interpretation business--is to become impatient with our students' hesitant gropings and tell them the "official meaning" of a story. We need to resist this temptation. The longer I tell my students what the "meanings" of stories are, the longer they are unnaturally dependent upon me and the longer it will take them to create their own responses to pieces of literature. Only when I can encourage them to respond and accept their reactions--no matter how fragmentary and uninformed they seem at first--will I be teaching them how to perform expertly, maturely, and confidently these complex language skills or reading and understanding worthwhile literature.

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